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### **The Relationship between the Art of the Word and the Illiterate Manual Arts in Nicholas of Cusa's Conception of the Arts**

The concept of art is a lens through which one can explore the thought of Nicholas of Cusa. He uses this notion throughout his work in order to address the productive dynamism of the divine mind as well as the human mind. With a focus on the human arts as likenesses of the divine art, this paper studies the relationship between the art of the word and the illiterate manual arts. Firstly, we examine the *ars coniecturalis* as a human art form that Cusanus presents for the first time *in extenso* in "De coniecturis". Secondly, we address the power of the art of the word through the production of its most precious form, the spoken word. Thirdly, and finally, we inquire into the power of the manual arts through the example of the *idiotas*' making of wooden spoons in the "De mente" in order to show the relationship between this art and the art of the word.

*Keywords: Nicholas of Cusa, human arts, art of the word, manual arts, concordance*

#### *1. The ars coniecturalis as the Center of the Cusan Conception of the Human Arts*

Nicholas of Cusa employs the notion of art (*ars*) from his first sermons and uses it to refer to divine art as well as the human arts.<sup>1</sup> Later, in "Sermo" XXII, "Dies Sanctificatus" (1440), he posits the relationship between divine art and the hu-

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<sup>1</sup> Nicholas of Cusa's Works are cited from the critical edition: Nicolai de Cusa, *Opera Omnia*, iussu et auctoritate Academiae Litterarum Heidelbergensis ad codicum fidem edita (h). We offer the canonical abbreviation of text, book and chapter where appropriate, and between brackets, volume and paragraph of the critical edition. Cf. Sermo IV (h. XVI n.11); Sermo IX (h XVI n.33); Sermo XI (h XVI n.6), among others.

man arts.<sup>2</sup> In “De docta ignorantia II”, when discussing the arts used to study the universe, specifically the arts of the *quadrivium*, Cusanus also alludes to the relationship between infinite art and the finite arts,<sup>3</sup> while, at the same time, delving deeper into his comprehension of the human arts. Guided by the principle of the disproportion of the infinite with respect to the finite,<sup>4</sup> he affirms that the human arts lack precision (*praecisio*), since they proceed from finite comprehension.<sup>5</sup> One cannot measure (*mensurare*) the works of infinite art, which created all, with precision, in accordance with the notion of the incomprehensible and inexpressible absolute proportion (*proportio*). Simply put, the human arts measure everything *humaniter*.

Cusanus conveys his conception of the human arts *in extenso* in his treatise “De coniecturis”. His perspective in this work is no longer that of human understanding in the presence of the maximum (*maximum*), as in “De docta ignorantia”. Yet, although the works adopt different perspectives, they are complementary. In several passages of “De docta ignorantia”, he announces what he addresses later in “De coniecturis”, especially that which concerns his conception of the human mind (*humana mens*).<sup>6</sup>

In the “Prologue” to “De coniecturis”, Nicholas of Cusa refers to the intellectual intuition that guides the maximum doctrine of ignorance (*maxima doctrina ignorantiae*), by which the precision of truth is unattainable, incomprehensible, and inexpressible for a finite (ignorant) understanding. From this, he concludes that all human expression regarding the true is conjecture (*coniectura*). Therefore, the conjectural apprehension of the true becomes endless in conjectural

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Sermo XXII (h XVI n.25): “Hic considera, quo modo Verbum est omnis ars, forma ac ratio. Recurre ad similitudinem artis nostrae, quae in nobis est: Quo modo in verbo mentis, quod est ars, complicantur artificiata eius, et quo modo ars nostra in sua simplicitate supra tempus et divisionem complicat artificiata et ipsa artificiata complicatam artem explicant.”

<sup>3</sup> Cf. De doct. ign. II c.13 (h I n.175-176).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. De doct. ign. I c.3 (h I n.9): “Quoniam ex se manifestum est infiniti ad finitum proportionem non esse”. Though this principle does not originate in Nicholas of Cusa, the novelty lies in how radically he assimilates it and in the particular way of thinking that follows it. For a precedent, among others cf. Bonaventura: De scientia Christi q. 6 p. 32 lin. 69: “Nihil enim improportionaliter excedit omne finitum nisi infinitum”; In Sent. I dist. 48 a. I q. I arg. 2; Thomas Aq.: S. theol. I q. 2 a.2 arg. 3: “Praeterea, si demonstraretur Deum esse, hoc non esset nisi ex effectibus eius. Sed effectus eius non sunt proportionati ei, cum ipse sit infinitus, et effectus finiti; finiti autem ad infinitum non est proportio.” Aristoteles Latinus: De caelo I t. 52 (A c.6 2740 7-8): “Infinitum enim ad finitum in nulla proportione est,”

<sup>5</sup> Cf. De doct. ign. II c.1 (h I nn. 91-94).

<sup>6</sup> The mentions in *De docta ignorantia* refer, above all, to the anthropological and gnoseological aspects of the doctrine he addresses in *De coniecturis*. Cf. De doct. ign. II c.6 (h I n.123); De doct. ign. II c.8 (h I n.140); De doct. ign. II c.9 (h I n.150); De doct. ign. III c.1 (h I n.187).

otherness (*alteritas coniecturalis*).<sup>7</sup> There is not any conjecture that does not express, under the condition of its mode, the truth, in such a way that a finite understanding can grasp it, since all conjecture takes place *within* the maximum and minimum doctrine of ignorance. Hence, *ignorantia* and *coniectura* make up the same doctrine.<sup>8</sup>

But, as we have noted, in “De coniecturis”, Nicholas of Cusa focuses on how the human mind operates. He identifies the creative power (*vis*) of the human mind with an art, which he calls the art of conjecture (*ars coniecturalis*), and he offers a symbolic investigation (*symbolice investigare*) of the nature, extension, and limits of this art, and the conjectures through which it expresses itself.

The art of conjecture must not be identified with a particular art: that is, with a specific technique or vocabulary. It does not refer to a specific contraction (*contractio*) of meaning. The art of conjecture describes the creative character of the human mind: that is, the active, dynamic, and creative power that defines it as the human measure of all things. For this reason, the art of conjecture is central to the Cusan conception of the arts, as their principle and form.

Regarding the origin of conjectures (*coniecturarum origo*), Nicholas of Cusa introduces its metaphysical foundation in “De coniecturis”.<sup>9</sup> Therein, he claims that conjectures originate in the human mind, just as real things originate in the absolute mind. The human mind is the form of a conjectural world (*forma coniecturalis mundo*), just as the divine mind is the form (*forma essendi*) of things. The human mind is the being of its own conjectures (*entitas coniecturam suarum*), just as the infinite mind is the being of the world. It is, therefore, a likeness (*similitudo*) of the divine mind. Given this likeness, the human mind participates in the divine creative nature. From itself, from its own creative power, it unfolds a conjectural world, which is a likeness of the real world.

As we can see, the *likeness* of the human and the divine mind lies in their shared activity. Nicholas of Cusa establishes a likeness between the creative activity of the divine mind’s *art of entifying* and the human mind’s *art of conjecture*, which, as we have noted, is the origin, form, and being of conjectures. The human mind contemplates itself in the world of conjectures, which unfolds (*explicatio*) from its own enfolding (*complicatio*). The more it contemplates itself in this universe, the more it returns to itself. As we will see, this is the dynamism of the human mind’s art of conjecture: it displays its creative power in a world of conjectures and, at the same time, returns to itself, in an act of self-reflection or self-knowledge. In doing so, it seeks in conjecture to know itself and the di-

<sup>7</sup> De coni. I, Prol. (h III n.2): “Cognoscitur igitur inattingibilis veritatis unitas alteritate coniecturali.” Cf. Bocken (2007: 113-153).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. D’Amico (2005: 267-279).

<sup>9</sup> De coni. I c.1 (h III n.5): “Coniecturalis itaque mundi humana mens forma exstitit uti realis divina. Quapropter ut absoluta illa divina entitas est omne id quod est in quolibet quod est, ita et mentis humanae onenessas est coniecturarum suarum entitas.”

vine mind from which everything originates. Therefore, the human mind imitates the divine, since the latter conceives itself and everything else through its eternal and absolute productive dynamism. This is how Nicholas of Cusa reinvents the classical concept of imitation (*imitatio*), closely related to that of likeness (*similitudo*), and therefore, to a creative activity or action of the mind.<sup>10</sup>

Years later, in “De beryllo”, Nicholas of Cusa calls man a “second god” (*secundus deus*) in virtue of the creative power of his mind.<sup>11</sup> Just as the divine mind creates real beings and natural forms in its likeness (*similitudines*), the human mind shapes conceptual beings and artificial forms in its own likeness. As the human mind is image and likeness of the divine mind, the conceptual beings are likeness of the natural ones. The mind adds art to the signs or images found in nature through likeness, which is the principle of the art that imitates nature. So, the human mind measures (*mensurare*) itself based on the power of its creations; in them, it also measures the divine mind, from which everything proceeds. Thus, truth (*veritas*) is measured through the image (*imago*), and if the mind does not reveal itself in the image, it cannot know or interpret it.

However, the human mind’s creative dynamism passes through different modes (*modus*). Although Nicholas of Cusa makes reference to them in his early sermons (in regards to the degrees of knowledge leading to the contemplative life)<sup>12</sup> and then in “De docta ignorantia” (when addressing the problem of knowledge of the *maximum*),<sup>13</sup> he discusses them in detail in „De coniecturis” and later texts such as “De mente”, “De beryllo”, “De ludo globi”, and “Compendium”. To introduce this subject, we will focus on “De coniecturis”, since, as we have noted, we find the first lengthy discussion of these topics there. In this work, he addresses the different modes or powers of the mind, starting with the mind’s first symbolic exemplar: the number.<sup>14</sup> He identifies these modes or powers with four onenesses of the mind. To do this, he follows a Pythagorean concept that makes the number ten (10) the perfect number. This denary represents the sum of the natural progression of 1, 2, 3, and 4.<sup>15</sup> As shown in his out-

<sup>10</sup> Nicholas of Cusa refers to this axiom, in his own reformulation, among others in *De doc. ign.* II c.1 (h I n.94); *De con.* II c.12 (h III nn.131-133); *De mente* c.13 (h <sup>2</sup>V n.149); *Ep. ad Nic. Bon.* n.18; *Sermo XXXVIII* (h XVII n.11); *Sermo CCXVI* (h XIX n.27). Cf. Casarella (2017: 211-218); Moritz (2009); André (1995: 556-569); Santinello (1958: 252-262); Flasch (1955: 265-306; 270-274).

<sup>11</sup> Cf. *De beryl.* (h <sup>2</sup>XI/1 n.7).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. *Sermo V* (h XVI nn.23-24); *Sermo VIII* (h XVI nn.15-23); *Sermo IX* (h XVI nn.32-35).

<sup>13</sup> Cf. *De doct. ign.* I c.4 (h I n.11).

<sup>14</sup> Cf. *De con.* I c.1-2 (h III nn.7-9). The number is already present in *De docta ignorantia* as element of the proportion. Cf. *De doct. ign.* I c.1 (h I n.3): “Proportio vero cum convinientiam in aliquo uno simul et alteritatem dicat, absque numero intelligi nequit. Numerus ergo omnia proportionabilia includit.”

<sup>15</sup> Cf. *De con.* I c.3 (h III nn.10-11).

line, the first oneness of the mind pertains to the surmising mode in which God is conceived in his absolute character. The second pertains to intelligence (*intelligentia*). The third, to reason (*ratio*) or soul (*anima*). And, finally, the fourth oneness pertains to the body.<sup>16</sup> In all, the human mind encompasses everything: the divine (*divine*), the intellectual (*intellectualiter*), the rational (*rationaliter*) and the sensible (*sensibiliter*).<sup>17</sup> Thus, Nicholas of Cusa translates the four onenesses of the Neoplatonic tradition, showing the descent and ascent of the real, in terms of how the human mind's art of surmising operates.<sup>18</sup> As we will observe next, the mind performs a simultaneous movement of ascent and descent in the practice of the art of surmising through which it expresses itself.

The fourth and last oneness expresses the surmising mode in which the human mind embraces the sensible. It is pure unfolding without enfolding,<sup>19</sup> since the mind reaches the senses (*sensus*) and perceives the species (*species*) or sensible phantoms that detach from things (*res*) in a confused and dark manner. We use the word "thing" in order to preserve the uncertainty of that which comes from nature or from the natural realm and affects the senses.

When the mind ascends from the oneness of the sensible, it reaches the third oneness: the soul (*anima*) or reason (*ratio*).<sup>20</sup> On the one hand, this oneness is the enfolding of the sensible. There, all that is confusing finds distinction, and all that is dark, clarity. On the other hand, on the descent, it finds the unfolding of intelligence, or the second oneness. Here, the soul or reason is a power through which the mind can distinguish, shape, and create images.

The mind's rational power mediates between the intellect (*intellectus*) and the senses. It makes a simultaneous and circular ascending and descending movement: it progresses by regressing and regresses by progressing.<sup>21</sup> That said, in the ascent, nothing is in the soul or reason that is not already present in the sens-

<sup>16</sup> Nicholas of Cusa presents and explains each of the four units in *De coniecturis* I c. 4-8 (h III nn.12-36). Cf. Mojsisch (1998: 470-489); Flasch (1998: 143-164); Koch (1962: 101-123).

<sup>17</sup> *De coni.* I c.4 (h III n.12-13).

<sup>18</sup> *De coni.* I c.4 (h III n.14): "Has mentales unitates vocalibus signis figurat. Primam quidem altissimam simplicissimamque mentem deum nominat, aliam radicalem, nullam priorem sui habens radicem, intelligentiam appellat, tertiam quadratam, intelligentiae contractionem, animam vocat, finalem autem soliditatem grossam explicatam, non amplius complicantem corpus esse coniecturatur."

<sup>19</sup> *De coni.* I c.8 (h III n.32): "Sensus enim sentit et non discernit. Omnis enim discretio a ratione est."

<sup>20</sup> Cf. *De coni.* I c.7 (h III nn.27-29).

<sup>21</sup> Cf. *De coni.* I c.8 (h III n.36): "Ego te etiam unum notare rogo, quomodo ipsa sensibilis unitas, cui non patet progrediendi ulterior via, in sursum regreditur; nam descendente ratione in sensum sensus redit in rationem. Et in hoc regressionis progressionem advertito."

es;<sup>22</sup> and, in the descent, the soul or reason is the oneness in which the intellect expresses itself. This is, therefore, the region where conjecture is displayed, be it as image or concept.

In this regard, the role of imagination (*imaginatio*) or power of imagination (*vis imaginandi*) in the art or conjecture should also be highlighted. Although not part of the exposition of the four surmising onenesses of the mind in “De coniecturis” I, Nicholas of Cusa does address it in “De coniecturis” II, c.16, titled “De humana anima”. In this section, he refers to imagination as he distinguishes between the two sides of reason or soul: one is connected to the intellect, which he calls apprehensive (*apprehensiva*), and the other is connected to the senses, which he calls fantasy or imagination (*phantasia sive imaginatio*).<sup>23</sup> It follows that imagination is also conceived as an active and productive power of the mind.<sup>24</sup>

When the mind ascends to the principle of reason, it embraces the second oneness – the intellect<sup>25</sup> – which yields, in turn, the unfolding of the first oneness. In the realm of the intellect (the root of all conjecture), opposites do not meet disjunctively (*disiunctive*) but copulatively (*copulative*). Hence, movement does not oppose rest, nor does act oppose possibility, nor does being oppose non-being. The entirety of things that the mind conjectures intellectually does not have a value that opposes it. Within it, opposites coincide (*coincidentia oppositorum*). Yet, the mind does not stop there. It seeks to move forward, through conjecture, toward a comprehension of the absolute, the simplicity of the first oneness. This manner of thinking constitutes a very subtle (*subtilissima*) conjecture that leads the mind to the oneness or enfolding principle of the art of conjecture.<sup>26</sup>

It should be noted that separating the sensible, rational, intellectual, and divine powers of the mind from each other does not imply a difference in the faculties of knowledge. As mentioned above, this is all about one power, the mind, which expresses itself through several modes or powers, in a simultaneously ascending and descending circular dynamism, which Nicholas of Cusa denominates, as we will see, *vis assimilativa* in his “De mente”.

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<sup>22</sup> A principle from the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition that Cusanus adopts for his own theory of knowledge. Cf. Sermo XX (h XVI n.5); De mente c.6 (h <sup>2</sup>V n.112); Comp. c.2 (h XI/3 n.4) *et passim*.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. De coni. II c.16 (h III n.157).

<sup>24</sup> Regarding the topic of productive imagination in Nicholas of Cusa’s thought, cf. Schwaetzer (2006: 83-96); Thurner (2006: 97-109).

<sup>25</sup> Cf. De coni. I c.6 (h III nn.22-26).

<sup>26</sup> Cf. De coni. I c.5 (h III nn.17-21).

## 2. The Artifice of the Art of the Word

So far, we have shown the schema of the human mind's dynamism, or art of conjecture, in light of "De coniecturis". Next, we would like to address certain arts that have their foundation in the dynamism of the mind or *ars coniecturalis*, which is the principle and form of the different arts. In this respect, Nicholas of Cusa affirms in his "Compendium":

Rather, while remaining singular in itself, the face manifests itself in different ways – even as a man's intellect, while remaining singular and invisible, manifests itself visibly and variously in its different arts and by means of the various products of the arts, even though in all these [arts and products] the intellect remains altogether unknown to any of the senses.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, the human mind creates the different arts in pursuit (*venatione*) of its nourishment (*cibus*), that is, the conjectural knowledge of itself and of the divine mind, in which it and everything originates. In order to achieve this, the human mind creates the mechanical arts, the liberal arts, and the moral sciences, among others, as Cusanus states in several texts.<sup>28</sup> We cannot reduce, then, Nicholas of Cusa's concept of art to what we now call "the fine arts". The arts must be identified with forms, principles, and actions of the mind *and* its inextricable relationship with nature.

As we have stated with regard to conjecture, every art form takes place between the maximum and minimum doctrine of ignorance (*maxima doctrina ignorantiae*) and expresses, according to its perspective, the truth in its conjecture of otherness (*alteritas coniecturalis*). The multiplicity of arts does not mean, for Nicholas of Cusa, a distancing from oneness. On the contrary, the greater the plurality, the greater the conjectural apprehension of the oneness.

However, in his "Compendium", Nicholas of Cusa establishes a hierarchy among the different arts and refers to one that is a complexity (*complexio*) of many. This is the art John the Apostle, designated as *Logos* or *Verbum*. The art of the word should not be identified with a given language or a particular expression. It is a form, principle, or dynamic and creative power of the human

<sup>27</sup> Comp. c. 8 (XV/3 n.24). Translation by Hopkins (1996: 1399).

<sup>28</sup> Cf. De doct. ign., II, c.1 (h I n.91 et sqq.); De coni. II c.1 (h III nn.178-179); De ludo globi, II (h IX n.93); Comp. c.6 (h XI/3 n.17-18 et sqq., as for the sources of tradition). On the *artibus mechanicis*: cf. Hugo de S. Victore: Didascalicon II 20 (38, 27): "mechanica septem scientias continet: lanificium, armaturum, navigationem, agriculturam, venationem, medicinam, theatricam"; cf. etiam Alfarabius: De ortu scientiarum (BB XIX 2, 20, 23-28); Dominicus Gundisalvi: De divisione philosophiae (BB IV 2-3 20, 23-28); Bonaventura: De reductione artium ad theologiam 2 (V 319 a). On the *septem artibus liberalibus*: cf. Cassiodorus: De artibus ac disciplinis liberalium litterarum (PL 70, 1149-1220); Isidorus Hispalensis: Etymologiarum sive originum libri I-III; Adelardus Bathensis: De eodem et diverso (BB IV I 89-104); Hugo de S. Victore: Didascalicon III 3 (52, 28-53, 8). On the *virtutes theologicae*: *fides*, *spes*, *caritas* cf. I Cor. 13, 13.

mind, from which every contraction of signification proceeds.<sup>29</sup> It is the only sign that is communicated or revealed in the rest of the arts. So, Nicholas of Cusa asks in the “Compendium”: “*For what is it that can be conceived of or spoken of or written about apart from this representation (species)*”.<sup>30</sup>

If the art of the word is the first of the arts, it is because it allows for the self-knowledge and self-interpretation of the human mind in the easiest and most natural of ways. The art of the word thus operates as the principle of the self-manifestation and self-knowledge of the mind. For Nicholas of Cusa, the mind knows itself in the word in which it is revealed. And it is through the word that the mind knows itself.

An analogy of proportion between the creative activities of the divine and human minds derives from this notion: just as the divine Word manifests, communicates or expresses itself in natural signs, so the human mind unfolds through artificial signs. Thus, the real world reveals the divine Word, as artificial signs reveal the human mind. As a result of the mind’s creative activity, words become the quintessential symbol of the *Verbum*’s creative activity. This is expressed in chapter seven of the “Compendium”.<sup>31</sup>

Cusanus considers the art of the word natural to man. In this regard, I will take the liberty of recalling “De coniecturis” II, c.12. Here, Nicholas of Cusa establishes the intellectual coincidence between art and nature in the *natural art* of the word, as per the mind’s second conjectural oneness. Hence, there is no art without nature or nature without art. Nevertheless, if we consider the mind’s first conjectural oneness – the divine – which exceeds the realm of coincidence, then the undifferentiated and absolute identity of art and nature is enfolded in its conjecture.

In this context, Cusanus defines “nature” (*natura*) as oneness and identity, and “art” (*ars*) as otherness and difference since art is the likeness (*similitudo*) of nature. Moreover, he observes that the human mind participates in art and nature to a greater or lesser extent, because the divine Word (the principle of coincidence between art and nature in the absolute) communicates itself in different ways to the human mind. This notion points to the fact that, in the unfolding of the human mind, oneness does not exist without otherness, identity without dif-

<sup>29</sup> At this point, in relation to this section of the paper, we should recall the importance of the *artes sermocinales* of the *trivium* in the second book of *De coniecturis*. Cf. *grammatica*: De coni. II c. 2 (h II n.86), II c.6 (h II n.102); *rhetorica*: De coni. II c.2 (h II n.85-6), II c.15 (h II n.150); *dialéctica*: De coni. II c.2 (h II n.84); II c.15 (h II n.150).

<sup>30</sup> Comp. c.7 (h XI/3 n.19).

<sup>31</sup> Comp. c.7 (h XI/3 n.20): “Mens igitur formator verbi cum non formet verbum, nisi ut se manifestet, tunc verbum non est nisi mentis ostensio. Nec varietas verborum aliud est quam unius mentis varia ostensio. Conceptio autem, qua mens se ipsam concipit, est verbum a mente genitum, scilicet sui ipsius cognitio. Verbum autem vocale est illius verbi ostensio. Omne autem, quod dici potest, non est nisi verbum.”

ference, and therefore, nature without art.<sup>32</sup> As a result, the art of the word is constituted by the concordance of art and nature.<sup>33</sup>

In several texts, Nicholas of Cusa presents the concordance (*concordantia*) between art and nature in the production of the spoken word: “De coniecturis”, II c.12; “De filiatione dei” c.3-4; “De genesi” c.4; and “Compendium” c.9. As he affirms in “De genesi”, this process is imperceptible to the senses.

When discussing the process in which the spoken word is created, we should turn to the distinction between the notions of art and the artificial.<sup>34</sup> Following our line of inquiry, we can say that all that is created is made of art and nature. Thus, nothing that has been created is solely art or nature because it proceeds from the absolute enfolding, which is the simple principle of the coincidence of art and nature. Therefore, the absolute identity of art and nature communicates itself in everything in various ways, with a greater or lesser composition of art and nature.

Nonetheless, the human arts, by virtue of their likeness, all participate in the practice of art and of nature. And the works that unfold from them, in the Cusan conception of art, do not show a contradiction between the artificial and the natural but rather a concordance, as we will show. The natural underlies all that is artificial. On one hand, the support or materiality of the artificial is found in nature. On the other hand, the artificial derives from the human mind’s creative activity, or art. Therefore, the human mind’s nature or art is expressed in all that is artificial.

I would like to point out that the process of production of the spoken word should not be understood as an ascending process that rises from the natural element to the artificial elements. Neither can it be understood as a descending process that goes from the artificial elements to the natural one. Rather, it is the simultaneous and circular process of ascent and descent to which we have referred when discussing the *ars coniecturalis*. This circularity is characteristic of the Cusan conception of art.

The production of words corresponds to a process in which the first element is potential and formable. Men find it in nature. The air (*aer*) is the potential, material condition of the word. Without it, the word would not be made perceptible

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<sup>32</sup> In relation to the language cf. De coni. II c.12 (h II n.131).

<sup>33</sup> In the art of the word we find both the spoken word, the *ars dicendi*, and the written word, the *ars scribendi*. Nicholas of Cusa emphasizes the complementariness of both arts. At this point, we should mention the importance of the written word as a theme in the Cusan conception of language, for example, the *book symbol* that Nicholas of Cusa uses in several of his texts in different ways. Cf. González Ríos (2019: 137-149).

<sup>34</sup> Cf. André (1995: 566-569); Santinello (1958: 245-246).

or audible.<sup>35</sup> As Nicholas of Cusa states in “De genesi”, the air is the formable voice (*vox formabilis*).<sup>36</sup>

The air, as a non-formed element, needs to be formed to become known. The passage from confusion (*confusio*) to distinction (*discretio*) is thus effected. The elements that follow, as formants, are creations of the human mind. Therefore, they are artificial. The letters (*litterae*) appear as the first formant elements in the process of production of the spoken word. Through them, the air is designated as a discrete sound.

I would like to emphasize the power of letters as symbols in Nicholas of Cusa’s thought: for example, the vowel “e” as *manuductio* in the comprehension of the triunity of the absolute concept in “Dialogus de possest”. The vowel “e” is triune, because it is the vowel for the words “*posse*”, “*esse*”, and “*nexus*” in the neologism “*possest*”.<sup>37</sup> We could say the same about *principium A* in “De non aliud”, where the vowel “A” symbolizes the anteriority of the first principle.<sup>38</sup>

These initial, artificial signs combine together into syllables (*syllaba*). In turn, syllables combine together into words (*dictio*). And, finally, a combination of words gives birth to a sentence (*oratio*), or more precisely, a definition (*definitio*).<sup>39</sup> This marks the apex (*apex*) of human discourse because it is what creates knowledge (*scire facit*).<sup>40</sup> In the “Compendium”, Nicholas of Cusa elucidates the meaning of definition (*definitio*), using *complicatio* and *explicatio*, and echoing the discussion of the power of the word in chapter 33 of “De venatione sapientiae”.<sup>41</sup> A definition is thus an explanation or expression of what is enfolded in

<sup>35</sup> This is the reason why Van Velthoven has denominated the Cusan *vocalitas* theory a “*hylomorphyc* inspiration”. Cf. Van Velthoven (1977: 202).

<sup>36</sup> Cf. De gen. c.4 (h IV n.165): “Quapropter, dum de silentio vox vocatur, primo oritur sonus quasi vocis possibilitas, ut sic possibilitas quae sonus nec sit silentium nec vox formata sed formabilis. Deinde oriuntur elementa de confuso sono, post combinatio elementorum in syllabas, syllabarum in dictiones, dictionum in orationem. Et haec quidem eo ordine gradatim in vocatione silentii in verbum vocale exoriri constat, licet differentia prioritatis et posterioritatis non sane per auditum attingatur.”

<sup>37</sup> Cf. De poss. (h XI/2 n.57): “Video E simplicem vocalem unitrinam. Nam est vocalis ipsius possE, ipsius Esse et nExus utriusque. Vocalitas eius utique simplicissima est trina.”

<sup>38</sup> In his research about the problem of language in Nicholas of Cusa, Elpert has connected the “e” symbol to the point symbol. For as every syllable, word, sentence, or definition is built upon the simple element of the letter, so every geometric figure is initially a point, and lines, planes, and surfaces derive from it. Both the letter and the point are identified by Cusa as enfolding onenesses. Cf. Elpert (2002: 309-310). On the subject of the point as symbol in Nicholas of Cusa’s thought cf. Von Bredow (1995: 85-98).

<sup>39</sup> Cf. De doct. ign. II c.10 (h I n.153); De coni. II c.4 (h III n.91); II c.5 (h III n.95); De gen. c.4 (h IV n.165).

<sup>40</sup> De non aliud c.1 n.3; De ven. sap. c. 14 (h. XII n.39).

<sup>41</sup> Comp. c.10 (h XI/3 n.28). Cf. De ven. sap. c.33 (h XII n.98): “Ideo in diffinitione, quae est vocabuli explicatio, scientiae lucem affirmavit.”

the word. This concept of *definitio* is founded on the theology of the Word: the definition that defines itself and everything else, as Nicholas of Cusa states in “De non aliud”.

Nicholas of Cusa describes the definition that defines everything and itself as “not-other” (*non aliud*). We can ask why Cusanus declares a preference for this enigmatic name. This preference stems from the conception of God as definition itself. Even the subtitle of the Toledo manuscript indicates as much: “Eiusdem de non aliud ac etiam de diffinitione omnia diffinienti” (Toledo Capitular Library, Cod. 19-26, fol. 55r-74v). As the definition that defines everything and itself, “*non aliud*” has the power to be defined not by means of other terms but only through itself.<sup>42</sup> Defined in this way, the “*non aliud*” shows its antecedence with respect to all other (*aliud*) or opposition: it is a prior negation of the opposition between affirmation and negation.<sup>43</sup> Therefore, it is absolute in its definition of itself, which reveals its antecedence. God, signified by the “*non aliud*”, is thus seen in its absolute nature, that is, as defining itself. Though the “*non aliud*” expresses the triunity of the divine principle in an unusual way, it does it in an easy, concise, and clear manner. When “*non aliud*” defines itself, it discovers its triunity.<sup>44</sup>

Through the “*non aliud*”, however, Nicholas of Cusa shows the principle of definition defining itself in its immanence. All *aliud* can be defined by means of the “*non aliud*”. So, when we ask, for instance, what the sky is, we answer that it is *non aliud quam* sky.<sup>45</sup> In each particular definition, we see the principle defining itself in its immanence, as in this definition of “sky”, in which we not only define “sky” but the principle of definition as sky. The “*non aliud*” is, thus, the only name that defines itself and all else by means of itself.<sup>46</sup> Therefore, by means of the “not-other”, Nicholas of Cusa refers to the summit of the art of the word: namely, definition, which is considered here from both a metaphysical and linguistic perspective – *i.e.*, from the perspective of both the divine and human art of the word.

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<sup>42</sup> Cf. De non aliud c.1 n.4

<sup>43</sup> It is in itself a doubly negative, relational term. The “non” expresses the absolute and prior nature of the principle, its absolute negativity, and the “aliud” the negation in a privative sense, that is, the opposition established in the realm of alterity.

<sup>44</sup> De non aliud c.5 n.19: “Quando enim primum principium ipsum se definit per ‘non aliud’ significatum, in eo definitivo motu de non alio non aliud oritur atque de non alio et non alio exorto in non alio concluditur definitio, quae contemplans clarius, quam dici possit, intuebitur.”

<sup>45</sup> De non aliud c.1 n.5: “Nicolaus: Nihil cognitu facilius. Quid enim responderes, si quis te ‘quid est aliud?’ interrogaret? Nonne diceres: ‘non aliud quam aliud’? Sic, ‘quid caelum?’; responderes: ‘non aliud quam caelum’.”

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Reinhardt (2005: 427-428).

### 3. The Artifice of the Illiterate Manual Arts

As we have observed, Nicholas of Cusa makes reference to the art of the word as a complex of many arts. As the conjectural mirror of the infinite art or *Verbum*, it is placed at the apex (*apex*) in the hierarchy of the arts. However, we should also emphasize the place of the illiterate manual arts in Nicholas of Cusa's thought. Perhaps more than any other, they express the creative power of the human mind (as a likeness of the infinite creative art) through the artificial entities and forms they produce. Thus, although all finite art is *imago* of the infinite art, the manual arts are, in this respect, more productive and creative than others. They don't extract forms from already created things, but from the artist's own mind. And they show the concordance between art and nature through the creation of artificial forms and entities. In the exercise or practice of these arts, the artist transforms into *artifex* and *homo faber*, a demiurge that understands itself and everything in the mirror of its own creation.

There are many passages in which Cusanus refers to the illiterate manual arts. For instance, he mentions sculpture in "De quarendo Deum",<sup>47</sup> the production of glass in "De genesi" and later in "Cribatio alkorani",<sup>48</sup> the making of wooden spoons in "De mente" (where he also discusses other manual arts),<sup>49</sup> painting in "De visione Dei",<sup>50</sup> and cartography in "Compendium".<sup>51</sup> These references show Cusa's productive assimilation of the culture of his time and his knowledge of the different arts, their diverse techniques, and tools.<sup>52</sup> Accordingly, he places the manual arts in the center of his philosophical reflection. They make visible, perhaps more than others, the active and creative nature of the human mind's operations and of its *ars coniecturalis* as a *viva imago Dei*. In what follows, we focus on one case: the illiterate art of making (*fabricare*) wooden spoons (*ars cocleariae*) that the layman (*idiota*) practices in "De mente".

We have insisted on the illiterate nature of the manual arts. This aspect is not minor, given that it is the layman who, in "De mente", guides the reflection on the human mind's creative nature through the art of spoon-making. His philosophical disposition as rustic (*rusticus*), illiterate (*illiteratus*), ignorant, and a non-universitarian<sup>53</sup> contrasts with that of his interlocutors in the "Idiotae libri": the

<sup>47</sup> Cf. De quar. Deum c.4 (h IV n.48).

<sup>48</sup> Cf. De gen. c.3 (h IV n.164); Crib. Alk. I c.20 (h VIII n.82-83).

<sup>49</sup> Cf. De mente c.7 (h 2V nn.100-101).

<sup>50</sup> Cf. De vis. Dei c.25 (h VII n.111). Cf. De mente c.13 (h V n.149).

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Comp. c.8 (h XI/3 nn.22-24).

<sup>52</sup> In the last few years, deepening Santinello's aesthetic perspective (1958), Cuozzo has developed a line of investigation that shows the importance of the manual arts in Nicholas of Cusa's thought, from their entry into Renaissance culture to their systematic function in his thought. Cf. Cuozzo (in print), (2020), (2013), (2012), among others.

<sup>53</sup> Steiger (1988: X-XIII).

orator (*orator*), with whom he converses in the first two writings of “De sapientia” I and II, and the philosopher (*philosophus*) with whom he talks in the other two. The layman thinks that both the orator and the philosopher nourish themselves with something that is neither their own nor natural (*proprium et naturale*).<sup>54</sup> Their knowledge is based on the study of the *auctoritates*. In the case of the orator, it is bookish erudition. In the case of the philosopher, it is his command of theological and philosophical doctrines. Faced with this, the layman declares: “I don’t know whether I am a Pythagorean or something else. But I do know that no one’s authority guides me, even if it attempts to influence me.”<sup>55</sup>

In the four dialogues, the layman channels his reflections through his experience<sup>56</sup>: his experience in the market, which is presented as an enigma (*aenigma*) of the human and the divine mind’s operations (*mensurare, pondere, numerare*) in “De sapientia” I; the experience of making wooden spoons in “De mente”; and the experience of experimenting with scales in “De staticis experimentis”. He thus draws attention to the productive dynamism of the human mind, in which the mind understands itself and its principle. In the “De mente”, especially, the layman conveys his reflection not through books and doctrines but through the *manuductio* of its *rusticas operas*. He experiences the mind’s operations through the practice of this manual art. This is how the layman provides *theorias* that make the difficult easy.<sup>57</sup>

Regarding the process of spoon-making, just as in the case of the spoken word, it is a dynamic process of simultaneous ascent and descent – a process that Nicholas of Cusa calls the assimilative power of the mind (*vis assimilativa*).<sup>58</sup> This power is certainly a heteronym of *ars coniecturalis*, a process in which the different powers of the mind take part, as referred to in the discussion of *ars coniecturalis*. In the ascent, the body is excited by the obstacles of things and, through the senses, it receives the sensible phantoms or images that emanate from things – in this case, wood. The mind, in its function as soul (*anima*), that is, in its purpose of animating the body, receives sensible phantoms through

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<sup>54</sup> De sap. I (h 2V n.3).

<sup>55</sup> De mente c.6 (h 2V n.88). This translation is taken from Hopkins (1996: 551). Cf. De sap. I (h 2V n.2): “Traxit te opinio auctoritatis.”

<sup>56</sup> Cf. Bacher (2015).

<sup>57</sup> The notion of *theoria* does not frequently appear in Nicholas of Cusa’s writings. Cf. Sermo XIX (h XVI/3 n.5); De quaer. deum (h IV n.32); De sap. I (h V n.10); De sap. II (h V n.28); De mente (h V n.54; n.160). However, he does frequently refer to the verb from which the noun derives: “theo”, which in Latin is translated as “see” (*videre*) and “run” (*curro*). Cf. Sermo XX (h XVI n.9); De deo absc. (h IV n.14); De quar. deum (h IV n.19); De non aliud c.23 n.104.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. De mente c.7-9 (h 2V nn. 97-125).

the senses and orders them progressively through imagination (*imaginatio*), reason (*ratio*), and the intellect (*intellectus*).<sup>59</sup>

In the descent, the mind reaches the senses through the spirit of the arteries (*spiritus arteriarum*). They express the body's spiritual animation. The mind navigates the body through the spirit of the arteries, which flex and reach the senses. This is how the mind itself reaches the senses in the act of sensible perception. These spirits take different shapes, according to the sense they animate and, thus, assimilate to the sensible phantoms or sensible images.<sup>60</sup>

When explaining his art to the philosopher, the layman affirms that the spoon's form is in his own mind. He does not draw out the form from already created things but from his own mind.<sup>61</sup> And this form sensibly communicates itself and takes part in the matter (the wood) that is fabricated using technique and tools. In this case, wood is the material element: potential, moldable, without which the creation of the artificial entity would not be possible. Nevertheless, it is an element that requires other elements proceeding from the human mind in order to be created. Thus, the form gives the matter proportion so that the former can shine through the latter.

We would like to draw attention to the concept of proportion. It is identified with the place (*locus*) of the form. Nicholas of Cusa holds that form cannot shine in the spoon without the mediation of proportion. Therefore, the matter is the place of proportion.<sup>62</sup> The purpose of the layman's art is to make (*fabricare*) a spoon whose form shines in accordance to the proportion – though this very simple form may be unattainable, incomprehensible, and impossible to communicate with precision, even for him. The precision of the form is communicated *contracte* in the plurality or multiplicity of spoons or artificial entities.<sup>63</sup> Nicholas of Cusa thus establishes a likeness between divine and human arts. Just as God, unique and enfolding of the real, is communicated in all that is created, so the spoon's enfolding form originates in the *humana mens* and is communicated in all the spoons created.

Starting with the production of the spoon, by which the layman describes the active and creative nature of the human mind, Nicholas of Cusa alludes to the imposition of names through a parallelism. Names are imposed on things

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<sup>59</sup> Cf. De mente c.4 (h 2V n.77): “sic vis mentis, quae est vis comprehensiva rerum et notionalis, non potest in suas operationes, nisi excitetur a sensibilibus, et non potest excitari nisi mediantibus phantasmatis sensibilibus.” Cf. De mente c.7 (h 2V n.104).

<sup>60</sup> Cf. De mente c.7 (h 2V nn.101-102).

<sup>61</sup> De mente c.2 (h 2V n.62): “Coclear extra mentis nostrae ideam aliud non habet exemplar.”

<sup>62</sup> Cf. De mente c.6 (h 2V n.92).

<sup>63</sup> De mente c.2 (h 2V n.63): “in omnibus coclearibus non nisi ipsa simplicissima forma varie relucet, magis in uno et minus in alio et in nullo praecise.”

through an operation of reason (*ratio*).<sup>64</sup> It is reason that makes the discernment (*discretio*) and concordance (*concordantia*) of what falls within the realm of the senses, as we have seen in “De coniecturis”. Thus, the name unites the thing through an operation of reason, after the form reaches the matter.<sup>65</sup> This is why a language has several names for one thing and different languages have other names for that same thing. Even if we ignore the precise name, we don’t impose just any name but rather a convenient one.

Nicholas of Cusa calls the precise name of the form *nomen naturale*. This natural name is communicated and shines out from the different names imposed by reason. Thus, all the names express the natural name *contracte*. Moreover, they all find their basis in an inexpressible and unpronounceable name, as Cusanus affirms in “De coniecturis”.<sup>66</sup> The natural name is present in all names as their principle. So, the different names are images of the natural name, as well.<sup>67</sup> Nicholas of Cusa affirms in “De mente”:

Now, the wood receives a name from the advent of a form, so that when there arises the proportion in which spoonness shines forth, the wood is called by the name “spoon”; and so, in this way, the name is united to the form. Nevertheless, the imposition of the name is made at will, since another name could have been imposed. Thus, although [the imposition is made] at will, nonetheless [the imposed name] is not *other* than, and not wholly different from, the natural name that is united to the form. Rather, after the advent of the form the natural name shines forth in all the various names imposed variously by all the different nations.<sup>68</sup>

In this regard the *complicatio*, form, and natural name are one and the same in the artist’s mind, as occurs similarly in the divine mind, where *forma essendi* and *nomen ineffabilis* are one and the same. However, on the side of the *explica-*

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<sup>64</sup> De mente c.2 (h 2V n.58): “Sunt enim vocabula motu rationis imposita”. Cf. De doct. ign. I c.24 (h I n.74): “Omnia enim nomina ex quadam singularitate rationis, per quam discretio fit unius ab alio, imposita sunt.”; De doct. ign. I c.24 (h I n.76): “Nomina quidem per motum rationis, qui intellectu multo inferior est, ad rerum discretionem imponuntur.” Cf. Casarella (2017: 202-211).

<sup>65</sup> De mente c.2 (h 2V n.59).

<sup>66</sup> De coni. II c.6 (h III n.101): “Vides verum aliter quam in alteritate imparticipabile. Unum igitur verum nomen cuiusque imparticipabile atque, uti est, ineffabile esse necesse est. Effabilia igitur nomina in alteritate verum ipsum tantum intellectuale nomen in ratione participant seu causa, quia ratio ipsa intellectualis unitatis alteritas est.”

<sup>67</sup> Klein (1992: 31) points out that Nicholas of Cusa does not thematize the natural name in the *De mente*, he only indicates its function. In addition, Klein (1992: 32) identifies the *nomen naturale* with the absolute and ineffable (*ineffabilis*) name of God. However, Meinhardt (1979: 113) holds that there is a difference between the *nomen naturale* and the *nomen absolutum*. He considers that names imposed by an operation of reason express the natural name present in the human mind, which, in turn, takes the ineffable name of God as principle. In this sense, André (2006: 13) rightly affirms that: “esse nome natural é já uma *explicatio* da força do nome uno e inefável de que todos os nomes são expressão.”

<sup>68</sup> De mente c.2 (h V n.64). Translation by Hopkins (1996: 539).

*tio*, in the artificial, the form shines out first and then the natural name, through the other names that are imposed.

#### 4. Final Considerations

Nicholas of Cusa progressively explores the power of the human arts through a symbolic investigation of how the human mind operates. Thus, we have offered a schema of what he called *ars coniecturalis*, a human art of the arts that shows the operations of the mind, i.e., a dynamic circular movement of simultaneous ascent and descent through the different powers or modes of knowledge.

We have observed that each art manifests the *ars coniecturalis* in its own way, and, according to a principle of Cusan thought, the greater the plurality of arts, the greater the conjectural apprehension of the truth. The concordance (*concordantia*) between the different arts follows from this principle. With this in mind, we have focused on the art of the word and the manual arts. In the creation of their work, both arts express the circular and productive dynamism of the human mind, and, thus, they not only establish the concordance between art and nature but also between the artificial and the natural.

However, as we have already seen, Nicholas of Cusa addresses not only the concordance of the human arts in his conjectural apprehension of the truth but also a hierarchy among them. In this sense, he points out the art of the word as the apex and the complex of the many arts, becoming a remarkable symbolic paradigm through which to consider divine art. As we have observed, the priority of the art of the word lies in its direct relationship with the theology of the Word.<sup>69</sup>

In turn, the illiterate manual arts are a remarkable symbolic paradigm through which to speculate on the creative power of the human mind. It manifests the creative power of the mind, which turns the individual into a human measure of all things and a second god. Thus, the manual arts, although a mirror and enigma of the divine mind, emphasize, more than any other art, the meaning of Cusan anthropology, which makes the individual a *viva imago Dei*.

Therefore, to conclude, we would like to highlight the power of the manual arts through an example we have discussed above. It is true that, in “De mente”, Nicholas of Cusa introduces the symbolic paradigm of spoon-making in order to draw attention to the name “mind” as a measure of all things (*mensura rerum*).<sup>70</sup> The example of the spoon’s creation is expressed as an enigma through which to understand the idea of the imposition of names and, particularly, the name “mind”. However, this example makes it clear that names are imposed on things only once form inheres in matter. The name comes after the spoon’s creation. So, it should be noted that the linguistic interpretation or comprehension of arti-

<sup>69</sup> Casarella (2017: 165-202); Duclow (1977: 282-299).

<sup>70</sup> Cf. De mente c.2 (h 2V n.58).

ficial entities and forms follows from the making of the thing. In this regard, Cuozzo has recently stressed that the names imposed on the artificial constitute a rational verification that transports the artificial entity to the realm of reason and discursive comprehension.<sup>71</sup> The name provides, therefore, a rational understanding of that which has been interpreted first by the senses and by a productive imagination. Thus, manual conjectures, performed through the art of spoon-making, among other arts, are translated into the realm of rational and discursive conjecture only at a later time. Nonetheless, the hand is the first interpreter of the form that exists in the artist's mind. The hand makes the form shine in the artificial, as in an image, and the name becomes its secondary interpreter: an interpretation of the manual interpretation. Thus, the illiterate manual arts place Cusanus at the threshold of Modernity and posit the individual as an interpreter of himself and of his principle through the mirror of his creations.

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<sup>71</sup> Cf. Cuozzo (2020: 84-86).

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